

Ghost 111

Chapter 111: sending letter

The sun had begun to dip behind the tiled roofs when the merchant's carriage rolled away from The Whisper Bowl. The rattle of the wheels faded into the murmur of evening, leaving behind the scent of ink, parchment, and roasted sesame.

For a heartbeat, the world stood still.

Then —

"We did it!"

Both women shouted at once.

Yao Qing threw her arms around Lian An, and the Empress laughed — loud, free, and unguarded — a sound she had not made in years. The twins, startled from their drowsy sweeping, peeked from behind the counter to see their two mistresses spinning in circles like children who had stolen the stars themselves.

"It's only been one month!" Yao Qing gasped between laughs. "One month since we reopened, and look at us! We've already bought the three shops next door — and tomorrow, the merchant comes again to talk about opening outlets all across the kingdom!"

Lian An smiled, her eyes glimmering in the lamplight. "The Whisper Bowl will be everywhere," she said softly. "From the capital to the borders — the name will travel faster than gossip."

Yao Qing laughed until she nearly cried. "Do you realize what this means, Lian An? I was a girl running from a marriage I never wanted — and now I'm a shop owner!"

"You were always meant to be more than someone's wife," the Empress replied. "You only needed a chance."

Yao Qing's expression softened, her voice trembling slightly. "That chance was you."

Lian An looked away, embarrassed by the sudden rush of emotion. "Don't make me sound so noble. You're the one who worked for it."

"But if you hadn't helped me, I would never have had the chance to work," Yao Qing said quietly. "When my family lost the treasury and our name turned to ashes, no one would even speak to us. We moved to the countryside — our old farmhouse. Eight rooms split between east and west, a kitchen in the middle, a small sitting area in front, and a garden that used to bloom before the weeds took it."

Her eyes grew distant, remembering. "My father and two brothers started keeping bees and opened a small butcher stall with the few silver coins we had left. My mother still makes her own soap and candles. They live, but... it's not enough."

The Empress listened silently, her gaze steady and kind.

"I want to send them something," Yao Qing continued, her voice shaking now. "I've earned ten thousand silver taels already — after the renovation, food, and wages. I'll send them three thousand. It won't bring back what we lost, but at least they can build a proper house — with bricks this time, not patched wood. East four rooms, west four rooms, the kitchen in the middle, and a front garden where my mother can grow lilies again."

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "I'll send money every month from now on. They must think I'm living like a beggar — or worse, that I died. They'll know now that I survived. That I'm doing well."

Lian An reached across the table and held her friend's hands. "That's a good plan. They'll be proud. You'll give them peace again."

Yao Qing nodded, blinking rapidly to chase away tears. "They'll worry less. I just want them to stop regretting me."

Lian An smiled faintly. "You have nothing to regret. You chose freedom over misery."

The memory flickered between them — that dawn months ago, when Yao Qing had stood trembling outside the Duke's palace gates, clutching a small bundle of clothes. The Empress, then newly wed and already disillusioned, had found her there.

Yao Qing had said, "They want to marry me to an old man who buries his wives before remembering their names."

And Lian An, still in her red bridal veil, had whispered, "Then run. Meet me by dawn, I'll take care of it."

That was how the Whisper Bowl had begun.

Now, looking at her friend's tearful smile, Lian An felt the weight of that memory and the quiet pride of what they had built since.

"You know," she said gently, "once things stabilize, I'll help you remove the treasury mark from your family name. But it will take time. The court isn't steady right now, and I have little power to act directly."

Yao Qing shook her head. "You've already done enough. Because of you, I can work, live freely, and send money home. You gave me a new life, Lian An."

The Empress smiled softly. "You're my childhood friend. I'd have done it for you even if the world turned against me."

For a moment, neither spoke. The restaurant was quiet except for the creak of wood and the faint hum of the ghosts hovering in the rafters.

Then Yao Qing laughed again, breaking the stillness. "When everything settles, I'll think about getting married. Not to some rich merchant or noble — just someone kind. Maybe have a baby, fill the house with noise. I think I'm ready for that now."

Lian An chuckled. "You'll find someone who can keep up with your stubbornness. Heaven help him."

They both laughed.

Yao Qing smiled and teased, "And you? When will you have a baby, Your Majesty?"

The question slipped out before she could stop it.

Lian An went silent.

Her fingers brushed the rim of her teacup, tracing the fine crack near its base. Her voice, when she spoke, was low. "My marriage... isn't one built for happiness."

Yao Qing's smile faded. "I know he doesn't treat you well. But you're strong. You deserve someone who loves you, Lian An."

The Empress exhaled softly, her eyes fixed on the lantern light. "Maybe in another life. In this one, duty ties me to someone who will never look at me the way he looks at power."

The room fell still. Outside, the faint sound of night rain began again, tapping gently on the tiled roof.

Finally, Lian An forced a small smile. "But that doesn't matter. I have this place. I have you. And I have work that feels real. Maybe that's enough."

Yao Qing reached across and squeezed her hand. "You'll find peace one day. You deserve that."

"Maybe," Lian An murmured.

Then she stood, brushing off her robe. "Now, stop crying and write that letter before I regret letting you speak about marriage."

Yao Qing laughed through her tears. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Don't 'Your Majesty' me," Lian An said, pretending to scold. "Here, I'm just Lian An."

Yao Qing grinned. "Then, Lian An, thank you — for everything."

Lian An gave her a look both fond and firm. "If you thank me again, I'll raise the rent on your new shops."

They both burst into laughter, the kind that cleans sorrow from the air.

"Go," the Empress said, still smiling. "Write your letter. Tell them everything — except the plague part."

"Of course," Yao Qing said, still laughing as she walked to the back room. "They'd faint if they heard that rumor."

When she was gone, Lian An turned toward the window. The lanterns outside painted golden halos on the wet street. She could hear the distant chatter of people passing by — vendors calling prices, a mother scolding her child, the twins sweeping and giggling somewhere in the hall.

This, she thought, was life — the kind she had once dreamed of before the palace walls.

Behind her, Fen Yu, the mischievous female ghost, floated closer. "You look sad, Your Majesty," she whispered.

Lian An shook her head lightly. "Just thinking."

Li Shen, the scholar ghost, adjusted his sleeves. "Thinking of what cannot be changed?"

"Perhaps," she said. "But perhaps I'll still change it."

Wei Rong, the old general spirit, grunted approvingly. "That's more like you."

The Empress smiled faintly. "You three should rest too."

"We don't sleep," Fen Yu said brightly.

"Then at least stop eating the offerings," Lian An said, shaking her head. "You've eaten more ghost buns than the living ones have tasted tonight."

Fen Yu only laughed, somersaulting midair. "I'm just helping with quality control."

That earned a snort from Wei Rong. "You'd fail inspection in any army."

Li Shen sighed. "And yet she leads our chaos."

Their soft bickering made Lian An laugh again — a quiet, human sound.

By the time Yao Qing returned, her letter sealed and ready, the restaurant had gone still again.

"I'll send it with the morning courier," she said, placing the envelope gently on the table. "And tomorrow, the merchant comes again. We'll be ready."

Lian An nodded, pride warming her chest. "We'll make this place known in every city. One bowl at a time."

Yao Qing smiled. "You sound like a merchant yourself."

"Perhaps I'm learning."

They shared one last laugh before closing the ledgers and extinguishing the lanterns.

The night air was cool and smelled faintly of rain. As they stood in the doorway, watching the street shimmer with reflections, Yao Qing said softly, "You know, when I think about it, we've come so far. You — an Empress — and me — a runaway merchant's daughter. And somehow, here we are."

Lian An's voice was gentle. "Maybe that's what friendship is — surviving together until the world makes sense again."

Yao Qing nodded. "Then let's keep surviving."

They closed the door behind them.

Upstairs, Lian An changed into her sleeping robe and sat by the small window, watching the quiet street. In her heart, an ache pulsed — not heavy, but deep. She thought of Yao Qing's dreams of marriage, of family, of happiness. And for the first time in years, she allowed herself to imagine the same — a small house, laughter in the kitchen, the freedom to love without fear.

Maybe one day, she thought.

But not yet.

For now, she had a restaurant, a friend, and a purpose. And that was enough to keep her breathing through the nights that palace life had stolen from her.

As she drifted into sleep, the ghosts whispered softly near the ceiling, watching over her as the rain began to fall again — steady, endless, and kind.